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AUTHOR Jackson, Melvin
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ABSTRACT

A literature review on the use of vouchers in American education is provided in this paper. The following issues are discussed with a focus on the degree of government involvement and school district role: community resource equalization, family power equalization, the use of vouchers, public options, and responses to voucher programs. Suggestions for investigating whether or not vouchers may be used effectively in public education include conducting long-term regional studies and addressing funding on national and regional levels. (17 references) (LMI)

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VOUCHERS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

BY

MELVIN JACKSON

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EARLY HISTORY OF VOUCHERS

Burrup and Brimley (1982, p. 278) have indicated that since the birth of the United States questions concerning how education would be funded have been asked. Would education be funded by public or private funds? One of these two bodies should have the responsibility of providing an education to the citizens. One negative argument against the public schools was: How would the gifted and the handicapped be educated apart from the public schools? Another concern was: How would the question on inequality among the races be dealt with? These are some of the questions that some leaders in education asked and talked about in attempting to identify resolutions to the problems. Others said that many of the problems in education could not be solved.

Many leaders in education feel that vouchers would be a means of financing education, but this theory really has not been tested. Leaders in education see advantages and disadvantages in the voucher plan or system. The disadvantages are that the wealthy people would be able to foot the bill for their children's education at some of the best schools in the world, and this also would mean those individuals who are not well-to-do would have to send their

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children to the less expensive schools. This would definitely create problems among the social classes. This system would also let some students go to the schools of choice and curricula in the larger cities and rural areas. Competitive schools in some rural areas is not good economically for some of these students.

Other leaders in education feel that voucher system would decentralize the schools, and they feel this method would bring the schools closer to the people. Some leaders feel this system would lessen the problems in desegregation because they believe that this system would help parents in selecting better schools for their children.

Gurawitz (1982, p. 101) says that the proponents of the voucher system sees many school districts having a monopoly over education in certain areas of education. Some people feel this system allows incentive to certain groups. This means that some government agencies should not produce a service because it can pay for it. Other people in education believe that reforms in education will better be served if they never brought up the issue of vouchers. Some people think distributing educational resources will be better served if the resources went to the students' parents. But for now, many see these resources being left with the district in which they attend school. Other people who support school finance reform

dislike the voucher because it decentralizes the supplies of the schools and this philosophy does not provide a fair share to all of the people involved. The real problem could occur anywhere because rejecting part of it would be good for some and bad for others.

There are two things tht might cause some problems with vouchers in the educational world. One is the question of just how much involvement should government have in education. Society and all institutions want a fair share of things government passes on to the public. Since many schools have not really dealt with vouchers, government must be involved somehow. Many say vouchers could lead to segregation in school systems depending on the income classes.

The second problem with vouchers is the school district. The institutions may not know how to treat vouchers. There could be additional problems between school districts and the federal government. The federal government's job is to see that services are provided properly.

COMMUNITY RESOURCE EQUALIZING

Guthrie and associates (1978, p. 156) saw problems with the voucher system. Vouchers, if used, should meet

criteria that fulfill the needs of a child's education, and it should not be based on a student's wealth. Also, vouchers should not depend on one's neighbor. Neighbors have a lot of influence on education in many communities. An example is a rural family might decide to pay for the children's education and the neighbor might want lower taxes for education in their rural community. What could happen is that several levels of education might or could exist in the community school. The voucher plan would allow families to choose the level of education that is not the same as the neighbor's children. Many students will get the type of education their parents could afford to pay.

If vouchers are put into school districts, one of the greatest concerns of education leaders is that the local school districts will not spread money equally among their schools. These people believe education decisions must be made so that all students get their fair share of education. This means that all funds should be spent fairly at the district level. This also means that education funds should not be spent by a wealthy few, or a few families and individuals who have a major impact on educational spending. Wealth should be based on the whole state and not the individual. If wealth is spent on a few students in education, lawsuit upon lawsuit can be filed. These are

a few reasons why vouchers might cause problems in education and why government will not get into the voucher system.

FAMILY POWER EQUALIZING

Benson (1978, p. 176) reports that the voucher systems need a lot of attention. The family power equalizing system would require the state to watch parents overusing the value of the voucher system. Parents already involve themselves with such activities as cake sales, and they also get involved in other school activities. The state would have to get an accounting system for such activities if vouchers were used in school districts. This could create a frustrating role for those parents who have to work with school activities. The state would have to see to it that those parents who might not be involved with school activities are informed of what is happening with funds. The state would have to se to it that the educational operation is opened up to all in its school community.

The state would also have to see that the school districts would not get too far away from teaching those American values that are established in our democratic system. One example is that the system does not employ

teachers with racist and facist ideas. This would mean that the school administration would have to see to it that these democratic values are taught and practiced in the district as much as possible.

Other experts who are proponents of the voucher system believe that too much state involvement with overseeing the operation of this system is not needed. The people say that the state should not have to police the system. They also feel that there should be a minimum of administrative involvement. But with less state involvement, this could give parents and others more involvement in carrying out their operation of the system.

Webb and others (1988, p. 188) found that there had been many voucher plans proposed for use in schools, and there are many methods for setting up a voucher system. The methods range from unregulated vouchers to egalitarian systems. The egalitarian vouchers would be the same for all students and schools could not add any extra costs to student fees.

Some experts on vouchers wondered if institutions should be classified into expense areas and wondered whether costs of school should be based on the parent's ability to pay for the cost of schooling. Other questions which were raised were should one voucher be good for the

total expense for all the children involved, and just how much should the administration charge in voucher matters.

At the state and local level voucher values might be determined by the average state cost, average local cost, actual local cost, money available and family income. If vouchers were supposed to help with personal cost, then governmental support could depend on the number of children who are below poverty level, educational needs, handicapped condition and number of children in a family. One expert feels that vouchers should be based on family income, and this approach will promote social efficiency. Another expert feels that poor students should get the full amount from the government while the students with wealth would get a share proportionally less until the grant got to zero for all families at or above average income. This plan would not be a freedom of choice for wealthy. Freedom to choose would be available to all parents and this would help the poor more. Others say the middle class would have less benefits and many feel this plan would never get much public support.

USE OF VOUCHER

Shepherd and Ragan (1982, p. 66) studied the Gary, Indiana School District where they have used vouchers

beginning in 1971. The plan was a feasibility study. Other school districts that were a part of that study were Seattle, Washington and Alum Rock, California. This plan allowed parents to receive payments from the Office of Economic Opportunity. The parents would then choose their own school and then pay the voucher to the children's school. All three school districts have now terminated the voucher plan. This was a project that the federal government observed closely. It allowed the parents a great deal of freedom in selecting and paying for their children's educational expenses. The plan was an experimental project.

Swanker and Donovan (1970, p. 244) stated, as others have said, that vouchers are not new ideas. This plan allows parents to pay for the schooling of their children and meet he costs of their student's education. This is something that historians have said was a part of our country's early history. The following proposal was developed by the Center for the Study of Public Policy and approved by the Office of Economic Opportunity (O.E.O.). The plan was drawn up differently from the other plans. The Jenck plan has some things in it that protected abuse of public involvement. The plan allowed that 50% or more of students be randomly selected by a lottery. It said that the make-up should be of various ethnic backgrounds.

This meant that all of the 50% of the plan would be racially mixed.

The second concern was the safeguards against the get-rich-quick operator or the fly-by-night individual(s). For those who were considered fly by night, they would get the money and move on. Parents were allowed to pay additional money so that their child would be admitted or accepted by the school they had chosen. The school, on the other hand, would accept the full voucher as payment for the child's cost of education. The school had to open its books to the voucher company.

One of the biggest problems with vouchers was that it would destroy the public schools, but it has not happened yet. One reason this has not happened if that the public has accepted the neighborhood school theory as a good thing. This theory has been accepted since the early years of our country. Another fear was that public school funds would go to support the affairs of the church relating to school and the teaching of religion. But, with the 50% requirement on all ethnic groups, it means that the church might not get enough money to support their activities.

PUBLIC OPTIONS FOR VOUCHER USE

Lewis (1981) describes how a private (family choice) school operated with vouchers being one of its biggest sources of funds. Seven women found a vacant building and decided to open a school for students in their community. The school was going to provide education for about 200 families. It was a pre-med K-12 school. All of the 200 families had made application for their children's education. The school was set up around the 1979 school code of California, wherein provisions were made for private schools. The staff of the school consisted of about six teachers.

The students at the upper elementary and high school levels were already introduced to dissecting frogs and mounting butterflies. The students had taken their shots for immunization and parents had signed documents for these shots. The parents could see the immunization files whenever they wanted.

The family choice school in 1982 began charging $2,500. When it began operation in 1979, it charged each student $1,900. Bt because of inflation and other rising costs, vouchers rose from $1,900 to $2,500. The school had a waiting list, a student body of 1500 students in 1982,

and its faculty was at fifteen and growing. The faculty was being paid between $5,000-8,000 per year. Some of the staff wanted more money and they began to talk about collective bargaining, others left for other jobs in education.

After the first family choice school was so successful, many others began to spring up in the West Coast area. Some of these schools had only 5-15 students, and many of the teachers did not have education courses in their background. These schools were trying to teach the basics and they were located in some very unusual places - garages and basements. These schools were competing for the new public support of the vouchers. Only a few of these schools were able to stay open, and most of them soon began to fall apart because they lacked funds and teachers.

Lerner (1981) found that in 1975, 20% of all 17 year olds had problems with reading and writing and had problems with other society matters, the community and with other people. These individuals were found to have no real choice to make - whether to make it on their own or having a productive life. One of the immediate reasons for having to make this decisions includes the fact that society calls for skilled individuals who are prepared and qualified for skilled labor jobs. One must be able to read and write well in order to live decently. If this is not the case,

then unemployment among this age group will occur. There will be more crimes and a longer welfare line for these individuals.

The solution to helping these people is to let each family choose a private school and let the taxpayers pay for it. If the individual has failed in the public school, private school is the next choice. This is a second chance for 17 year olds and a means for society to demonstrate to these youngsters that it is concerned about their well being. This plan should help society get rid of illiteracy, and this will get students involved more deeply in the learning process.

Some people are concerned that this plan will cost the public a few extra dollars to implement. Others say that taxpayers are already paying to help educate these individuals. The idea behind this plan is that those students who are failing in the public schools could use the same money that is being spent in the public schools for their private education. The literacy voucher is designed to give those students who did not finish public school a second chance to learn a skill or to complete their secondary education.

For those special interest groups who are concerned about such things as education of children, child welfare, civil rights and other special purpose agencies and

programs like Chapter 1, these individuals will have another chance to see these youth learn important skills that will enable them to function as adults.

Riddle (1986) states that William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, proposed in the fall of 1986 vouchers for disadvantaged students under the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act. There was an amendment to Chapter 1. This bill was introduced to the 98th Congress. Under the Reagan plan, vouchers and other programs connected to this plan would be determined by the local education agencies, but the parents would have the right to choose vouchers for their children. Those parents who were chosen to receive vouchers would receive checks to pay for the education of their children from their local education agency. Students could go outside of their local education agency if they met certain minimal stndards. One of these standards was not to discriminate on the basis of race. Those funds would not have to be used for supplementary services for those students who needed special help.

Mr. Bennett stated that this plan would improve education services for the disadvantaged by having more choices of schools to select from. This, according to Bennett, would help to reduce the gap in effective educational choice between children in the upper upper

class who would automatically attend private schools. This plan would give the disadvantaged an option they would not have in education because of their economic barriers. Aother advantage is that parents would have to look closer and monitor their children's education more closely.

Before the adoption of the 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, laws were passed requiring L.E.A. to put parents on their boards. Parents would serve in advisory capacities. But since that time, parent advisory councils have been on the decline, and some L.E.A. have discontinued parent advisory boards altogether.

Craig and White (1989) studied a state sponsored quasi voucher system in New Jersey, and indicated that it has produced a system for handicapped students. The system of vouchers can be traced to the Grossi Amendment that was passed in 1964 by the state legislature in New Jersey. The law gave educational agencie the power to send and receive students from public to private schools. The state of New Jersey provided the tuition payments. Handicapped students in that state got money through a quasi-voucher plan. Handicapped students who could not get the services they needed in the public schools of New Jersey had a few choices to get some services in some private schools, but their parents were the ones who made the selections of the private schools. But the choices were restricted by state

laws, and they pertained to the interpretation of a good place for the students, who were getting help for their special needs. When the parents of students, along with the study team, finds a good placement of a private school, the local school district pays the expense ot the private schools. The school district pays for the tuition and the transportation, and the state reimburses the school district. While choices are restricted, once one is stated, if an alternative setting is required, some private schools are available in New Jersey. The restrictions make the program a quasi-voucher plan.

This generous provision of financial support allows public schools to select and send those children needing special help to private schools or clinics, rather thn creating special classes in public schools. Public schools benefited in two ways. First, they did not have the facilities for the handicapped and they were reimbursed by the state of New Jersey.

Shapiro (1990, pp. 70-71) stated that the Milwaukee schools will miss 400 students from the system because these individuals will be attending private neighborhood schools. These individuals will receive $2,500 from the State of Wisconsin. The state of Oregon will vote on vouchers in November, 1990. This state is expected to give parents grants for $2,500 for each of their children going

to a private school. Students in Minnesota, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Harlem in New York select which public school they are going to attend. These grassroots sites are growing fast and other cities are attempting to do the same thing. If this trend continues, it will have a great impact on public education in America. The funding was once known as the voucher system, but now it is called "choice." What happens in this case is that the government would provide vouchers for every student in private schools, rather than sending the funds to school districts. The vouchers can be cashed at any state certified school - public, private and parochial. It is expected that all schools, both new and old, will be competing for these funds.

One of the reasons tht this idea developed was that theorists on the left and right were not satisfied with the reform movement and the past and present condition of the public schools in America. This movement was first proposed in the early sixties by Milton Friedman. It was tried in selected school districts in the early 1970's by the Office of Economic Opportunity. President Reagan tried to reopen the voucher plan in the mid-eighties. President Bush talked about vouchers when he was running for President, but the backers of this movement now are stemming from the publications of Politics, Markets and

America's Schools by John Chubb and Terry Moe. These two published a popular book that the public really liked. They say in their book that parents will support the voucher system because schools where they have choices are better for their children.

RESPONSES TO VOUCHER PROGRAMS

Pipho (1985, pp. 461-462) explained that Governor Rudy Perpick issued an eight point plan called the Access to Excellence. The plan when received in the education community caused a lot of heat among school districts in Minnesota. The word voucher was not in the governor's speech, but Access to Excellence was just a substitute word for it. This is what the school leaders were really hot about. A program of this type was developed in California. The plan in California was called in school vouchers by the supporters of that plan.

Governor Perpick's plan called for 11th and 12th graders to enroll in any school districts of Minnesota, and by the school year of 1989 the Minnesota governor would open this plan up to all grades. The program was studied by a task force and it never got off the ground. But in 1984, another program was developed which called for

parents to have their children moving from one school to another.

In Colorado, during the 1984 elections, Hugh Fowler, a former Republican state lawmaker, and who later moved on to the University of Colorado as Director of Education, proposed a voucher amendment to the state constitution. But the State Supreme Court ruled against it. Its supporters tried to get signatures, but it was not successful before the November election.

By 1985 another voucher idea came up in the legislature. Governor Richard Lamn wanted to give dropouts a second chance to go to the school they chose. But when the legislature went into session, the details of the voucher plan were not successfully worked out. Some wanted the bill to allow dropouts to get funds to go to private schools.

Farmington, Michigan is the location of an Education Voucher Institute. The Institute's main job is to get voucher ideas put into practice in many states in the United States. Its director says three main problems are: (1) public schools are established and the established schools will never be written off; (2) the two groups would be getting state support; and (3) poor people would gain a lot from this plan. Colorado's plan might be enforced more so than Minnesota's plan.

Pipho (1985) further stated that vouchers are good for minority students. He describes a program in the area of San Antonio, Texas. In this area, $1 million were spent by the Piper Foundation. This was a three year comprehensive educational improvement project. There were 16 districts and 49 high schools that participated. The program sponsored many conferences and workshops. It went after many minority students who were interested in preparing for many professions.

Nathan (1985, p. 476) reported that teachers and parents did not want choice, according to a Gallup Poll of public attitudes toward public schools. But 51% of the general public were in favor of vouchers and 64% of blacks were in favor of vouchers. People between ages 18 and 29 were in favor of vouchers. The popularity of vouchers has grown fromb 38% in 1971.

A large number of public school teachers were in favor of choice when their own children were involved. One survey in Michigan showed that teachers were twice as likely to send their children to private school. The 1980 Census Bureau data showed 46% of teachers living in Chicago's city limits had their children enrolled in a private school, but 22 percent of all school aged students are actually enrolled in a non-public school.

The Community Renewal Society studied inner city private education in Chicago in 1982. It found that there were 48 private non-Catholic schools in that city, and only blacks attended them. There were 35 elementary schools, nine high schools and four served students from kindergarten to 12th grade. There are 7,700 students attending these schools and 25% of these students are from low income families. The study showed some of the private schools in Chicago were started by teachers who had taught in the public or Catholic schools. Tuition of the schools ranged from $700 to $2,000 per year. This amount of money was far below the cost per pupil in the public schools. But parents who had their children in private schools in Chicago were very pleased with the services these children were getting. The report indicated that parents of all ethnic groups were willing to take a shot at the voucher plan.

Salquist (1981) stated that the heated discussions over tuition certification that the government approves of to parents and which later ends up with the districts students attend school in can become very emotional from time to time. One question which is the most often asked is should the state be a monopolistic supplier of school funding.

Both sides agree, those for and against vouchers, in their feelings that the schools should provide citizenship and good literacy skills for all public school students, the program should be efficient and equitable, and that it should provide for consensus although it should respect diversity. Another question that is asked, which many disaprove of, is whether the money should go to people running a state regulated market or to a public school.

Those individuals who support vouchers feel that the government should support social life, if it is dearly needed, and if there is very little direct involvement with government agencies. Those people who do not support vouchers feel that state schooling is a violation of the First Amendment. Others wonder if the voucher plan would create a climate that would function well or would lead to aa workable plan. Some wonder if everyone would get equal bargaining power. They even wonder if a plan put into operation would function well.

The Alum Rock School District in California used the voucher plan in the early 1970's. Alum Rock was a school district of 15,000 students, 55 percent were Hispanic and 12 percent black. They agreed to try the voucher plan. It began in 1972-73, The students were allowed to go to several public schools. Each one had a minischool option. This plan lasted for five years. No one outside of the

third year. The Minischool organization, the most important part of the voucher plan of making choice available, was stopped in the last year.

Two major voucher projects by the National Institute of Education failed during this time. The reasons given were principals did not support the program and voters did not support vouchers because they felt it was too expensive.

Social experimentation began to die in the late 1970's and many of these ideas were only a memory. Vouchers were beginning to be a rising cost of public schools in some states. Some states found voters who voted vouchers down heavy on election day. While some people feel that vouchers did not work because the education professionals were its major obstacle and teacher organizations were opposed to this plan, other people who were interested in public schools were not in favor of vouchers as well. Many felt that the government did not give enough transportation and information, the authorities at Alum Rock did not get full support from the general public and the Catholic school systems were not supportive because they feared the church-state issue. Vouchers would be something hard to salvage.

Raywid says that restructuring education is at a high for the eighties, but if disillusionment occurs, trouble

will follow right away. A few business leaders have stated the public schools are not producing good students, and other people have begun to question how long the public schools will last. A few people want to help the schools in any way they can.

The voucher, being the sole choice of parents desiring to choose their children's education, is an open market for the family and the community does not have anything to say about it. If the community is not a part of this plan, then the voucher could help bring down some values of the community and education of the community it serves. The community as a whole would not be helped if they were not involved in school matters. Vouchers would add more problems if the public is not involved.

Coons (1981, p. 255) stated that Chapter 1 dollars which are available today can be substituted for vouchers, but laws would have to change for this to happen. Those students who are failing academically are the main reason why Chapter 1 dollars are being spent on low income students. But, in order for this to be changed, Congress, and especially the states, would have to change some laws or make new ones.

Another problem that will occur is the church-state matter. This could affect every fiscal aspect of a church school. These institutions would qualify if laws and

church policies were changed to help educate all students in America. The big bonus in this movement today would be the schools that are formed to meet new changes in funding education. In the large urban community, the cost is $3,000 and in the rural setting it is much less.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several things I would suggest in order for vouchers to be used effectively in public education. The first is that the voucher system needs to be studied over a period of years in several areas of the United States - preferably the north, south, east, and west sections of this country. Each section of the country has its own way of life and the voucher plan could be utilized in a manner related to the particular area.

Funding would have to be addressed both nationally and regionally. If the proper funding is not worked out, the voucher system would be a complete failure. For the private and religious school, the church as well as the state would have to come to some type of agreement or the religious school can leave this matter alone. But there are some very hard matters to be worked out to solve this problem.

Public choice is another matter that must be worked out. It is a good idea to let students go to the school of their choice if their parents approve. This means they will get a good education, but there might be some problems with it. Despite this, it is a very good idea.

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